

WEBSITE GUIDE



A tool for Michigan communities looking to provide information to the public and build a positive image with their website



INTRODUCTION

Redevelopment Ready Communities® Best Practice 6.2 evaluates community marketing and promotion and how a community's website provides information to the public and builds a positive image. Certified Redevelopment Ready Communities have an updated, user-friendly municipal website that is easy to navigate and has the community's planning, zoning and development information grouped together. This guide was prepared to help communities determine whether their website needs to be updated to meet these best practices.

Information availability and accessibility, and ease of navigation are important factors of website organization. There are also intangible elements to consider, such as how a community approaches its community character, image, branding, etc. Unfortunately, this latter category often presents a greater challenge for communities dealing with issues related to an underperforming website. A community can have a highly functional website—but may still be missing opportunities to promote the community and its economic development potential.

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OVERVIEW AND OBJECTIVES

A municipal website should serve multiple purposes and user groups simultaneously. At a basic level, a municipal website is a means to share information about public meetings, access public documents, find links to other community organizations and to obtain general community information. The primary audience for this basic information is local residents and officials. Beyond this, a municipal website is also a significant expression of community character and image. People unfamiliar with a community will often look to a website for information and will form important first impressions and conclusions.

In the context of Redevelopment Ready Communities, it is essential that communities meet the threshold of functionality. Beyond this, they should also work toward communicating an appealing community image that speaks to community identity, desirability and opportunity. This image should connect with the local economic development strategy that outlines local opportunities, market potential and future

possibilities. The purpose of the municipal website is not to carry the full burden of articulating local economic development strategy. Rather, it is the opportunity to make a digital introduction that is engaging enough to encourage someone unfamiliar with the community to become more informed. The municipal website is essentially the “public face” of the community that invites more discovery.

Key factors

The following are key considerations of municipal web design examined herein:

Functionality: is content organized in a way that critical information is easy to access? Is the content easy to read on a variety of devices?

Relevance: does content serve the needs of users, or are there sections that could be refined or adjusted to make the site more usable?

Aesthetics: is the site visually attractive to put the community’s “best foot forward”?

Keep in mind different audiences who use your website:

- Local businesses
- Residents
- Prospective businesses
- Prospective residents
- Developers/builders

BEST PRACTICES: DESIGN AND FUNCTION

Website design is easy to overlook, especially for communities who are busy with the day-to-day matters at hand. However, research suggests that it is worth taking the time to ensure that visitors to your site get a good first impression. One study found that visitors' typical first impressions of sites were made in just 0.05 seconds¹. Given that many visitors use a municipal website as the primary way to find information about your city, this first impression is absolutely critical. A municipality must balance how their website appears to their citizens, their businesses and their prospective residents and businesses.

Home page

A municipal website's home page can be viewed as a kind of base of operations in that it must be clean, organized and well-maintained in order to

be effective. When was the last time your website's home page was updated? The following are a few ingredients of websites that feature an effective homepage:

Menu bar: How do you connect users with the other parts of your site? The menu bar is an easy-to-overlook component of your homepage's overall aesthetic. Our line of sight naturally scans from left to right and top to bottom, so menus should be organized from left to right across the top of your site's homepage. Many communities list their menus beneath their title banner. Many menu bars also include a "quick links" section, where several common tasks can be achieved (i.e. paying a parking ticket, filing a complaint, finding a park, etc.) One suggested outline is the following (next page):

STYLE DOS AND DON'TS	
Do...	Don't...
Use appropriate punctuation and capitalization, occasionally underlining or bolding text for emphasis. When in doubt, less is more.	USE ALL CAPS! Text displayed in this manner comes across as unprofessional and gives visitors the sense you are yelling at them.

¹ www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01449290500330448

EXAMPLE: CITY OF SMALLVILLE WEB MENU BAR DROPDOWNS

blue= external link

Residents	Visitors	Government	Vision & opportunity	About Smallville	Community links
Pay bills online	Positively Smallville	City Council	Master Plan	History	Positively Smallville
Taxes	Downtown Smallville	Agenda and minutes	Economic development	Smallville today	Smallville Chamber
Forms and applications	Smallville Airport	Council Goals	Downtown plan	City Hall (text box hours open)	Downtown Smallville
Recycling/yard waste	Griswold Auditorium	Photos/List Members	RRC	Contact us (form + address/phone)	Smallville District Library
Utilities	Farmers Market	Boards and committees	Capital Improvements Plan		Regent Theater
Positively Smallville	Parks	Members/ meeting dates	Bids		Smallville Airport
	Regent Theater	Agenda and minutes	Other plans and reports		Smallville County
		Current board openings			Smallville Public Schools
		Committee org chart			
		Departments			
		City administration			
		Building Department			
		Finance and assessing			
		Police Department			
		Public Works			
	Human resources				
	Department org chart				
	Ordinances				
	Elections				
	City Hall (hours + holidays)				

STYLE DOS AND DON'TS	
Do...	Don't...
Break up blocks of text into concise, easy-to-digest paragraphs. Convention dictates no more than five sentences per paragraph on paper, but grouping text by ideas will ensure your message is communicated more clearly.	Make one 1,000-word paragraph per page. Huge blocks of text are exhausting to read, and can often make groups of ideas more difficult to identify.

Search bar: Aside from a well-organized menu bar, the search bar feature is the most critical tool for navigating. Many visitors will use the search function before ever attempting to navigate the site on their own.

Photos/text: Visual displays are a crucial element to entice visitors to engage further into your site. Adding a “news” or changeable front page module will help to achieve this effect. Any direct links on the homepage should be limited to things the average citizen or business would need on an everyday basis. Text should be in an easy-to-read font and color, follow good rules of grammar and be made to look modern and engaging.

Cross-references

Cross-references are the glue that binds your website together. Visitors are more likely to benefit from using your site as they encounter references between your site’s pages and from your site to other relevant sites. Cross-references are not necessarily hyperlinks; they can be part of a website’s internal navigation or external links that take users to a third-party site.

Internal: internal cross-references are an essential part of a site’s functionality, but they also draw attention to your site’s relevance. Does your site

make documents such as plans, meeting notes and maps plainly visible to visitors? Does the page devoted to highlighting your recent planning process also reference where visitors can find an electronic version of the public meeting notes for that plan? Furthermore, are your cross-references designed so that your web pages emphasize the bigger picture network of how your plans, programs, and departments work together as a unit?

External: other hyperlinks to related sites, such as the library, chamber of commerce, county, school district, etc.

Communication

Marketing: focus on presenting honest, quality content. There is no greater way to increase visitor traffic to your site. Are your community’s assets and investment opportunities clearly presented and easily understood? Does your community’s Economic Development authority have its own dedicated link on your site’s homepage? See above graphic on menu bar icons for reference.

Keeping things up-to-date: Are updates posted at regular intervals, within one week of a meeting’s passing?

STYLE DOS AND DON'TS	
Do...	Don't...
Use appropriate typefaces and sizes. Choose no more than two or three different typefaces to use between headings, sub heads and main text, and make everything consistent throughout the site. Not sure which typeface to use? Sans serif typefaces, such as Arial, are easiest to read on a screen.	Have five different typefaces in a dozen different sizes and colors. Keep in mind that “visual clutter” detracts from your site’s aesthetics and usability.

Other best practices

Photos: photos can be the best marketing tools. Take photos regularly and be strategic about content—events, new businesses, construction in progress, downtown holiday decorations, etc.

Social media: if your municipality utilizes social media outlets such as Facebook, Twitter and others, these platforms should be integrated into your website. Social media accounts should be updated on a regular basis (at least once a week) and can be tied together so you can post once and it will automatically update the others.

Good examples (in no particular order):

www.cityofboyncity.com
www.cityofypsilanti.com
www.waynecounty.com
www.ci.independence.mo.us
www.louisvilleky.gov
www.fortlauderdale.gov
www.cityofchesapeake.net
www.shelbytwp.org
www.chattanooga.gov
www.glenview.il.us

WEBSITE CHECKLIST

Use the table below to help consider whether your website needs an overhaul, a refresh, or to add or replace sections of your website.

REFRESH	OVERHAUL	CRITERIA	COMMENTS/ DOCUMENTATION/LINKS
Homepage			
		Is the menu bar organized for easy navigation, with sub-headings under each menu item, a separate menu for economic development and a "quick links" section?	
		Is there a search bar?	
		Are photos up-to-date and consistent with the community's image?	
		Is text displayed in an easy to read format, using proper grammar/punctuation?	
		Is content relevant to the broader public, or is there text that fits better elsewhere on the site?	
Internal and external links			
		Is all of the following planning, zoning and development information available online? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Master plan and amenities • Board/commission applications • Capital improvements plan • Guide to development • Property information packages • Economic development strategy • Downtown plan • Corridor plan • Zoning ordinance • Online payment option • Partner organizations 	
		Is the planning, zoning and development information that is listed above grouped together in an easy-to-navigate way?	
		Are your site's internal links designed to emphasize the bigger picture context of how each of your plans, programs, and departments interact with one another?	
		Are there external links to your community's economic development authority? Chamber of Commerce? School districts? Public library? Arts council? Other local institutions?	
Communication			
		Are your community's assets and investment opportunities presented in a way that is easy for both residents and business owners to understand?	
		Are updates such as meeting minutes posted at regular intervals, i.e., within one week of a meeting's passing?	
Style guide			
		Does your website utilize an appropriate color scheme to minimize visual overstimulation, with no more than 3–4 colors?	
		Is text throughout the site broken up into groups of ideas rather than longer, harder to read single-paragraph blocks?	
		Are fonts consistent throughout the site, and are standard typefaces used to ensure a professional appearance?	